

“If Ye Be Willing and Obedient”

By Chris Ulrich

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Thank you. Remain standing, if you will, and those that are seated, please stand, if you can, for a word of prayer. Lord, we thank You this day for what already has been, Lord God, for the testimonies shared, God, for the singing, Lord God, for the spirit of worship, Lord God, for the remembrance of what happened fifteen years ago today, for celebrating Mike and Mary’s fortieth wedding anniversary today. Right now, I want to ask, God, that You’d intervene, Lord God, that You’d get myself out of the way, God, that we’d receive Your Word, Lord God, and we’d receive understanding, that we’d receive blessings, Lord God, and we’d receive direction, most importantly, God, for what You’d have for us going forward, Lord God. We thank You this day for Your truth; we thank You for salvation. We thank You, God, for loving us so much. We just want to pray, and ask this in Your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Thank you, you may be seated.

So, this month, as has been mentioned, we’re covering the time of sanctification. The Bible talks about, in Thessalonians, that we would know how to keep ourselves, our vessels, in sanctification and in honor (1 Thessalonians 4:4). In front of me, here, from the Book of First Chronicles, as Parrish preached from last week:

1 Chronicles 13:14 *And the ark of God remained with the family of Obbedom in his house three months. And the LORD blessed the house of Obbedom, and all that he had.*

Today, the sermon title—and this is something I normally don’t give until later on in the sermon, but I thought it appropriate to mention it right here off the bat—“If Ye Be Willing and Obedient.” It’s found in the Book of Isaiah, chapter one (Isaiah 1:19). There’s going to be four points today:

- Come out from among them and be separate
- Fight the good fight of faith
- Be Blessed
- Endure to the end

1st Point – Come Out From Among Them and Be Separate

I know, over the course of my life, I’ve heard some people say on occasion that they’ve had complete strangers approach them and ask if they were a Christian. Has anybody else heard about that, or had somebody come up to you, a complete stranger? Amen. I’m not saying it happens very often, but, I’m saying, if somebody comes up, completely out of the blue, and there’s nothing that we’ve done, to result in them approaching us, then all I can say is, Amen. That’s a testimony, but I believe it would have a lot more to do with God dealing with them, and highlighting the need for seeing somebody who’s a true born-again believer. But, I’m here to say that just because it’s never happened to you, or because it happens very seldom, don’t let that discourage you.

Now, this might sound a little bit odd to say, but there isn’t really a lot that separates Christians from the world as far as the outward appearance goes. Because I’m talking about more of the routines of life. But, our separation from the world might not always be immediately noticeable, not because we’re trying to blend in with the world, but because it takes time to get to know people. It takes time to get to others; it takes time for people to get to know us. Just about everybody is busy working, or traveling, or

shopping, or going to restaurants, spending time with family, and so on and so forth. And I'm not talking about the ungodly lifestyles, here, as far as that being a separation, that being a difference-maker, I'm just talking about, there are so many things that me, and everybody else does, as far as routines in this life, that it's not always that easy to tell immediately, or initially. It takes a little time.

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.*

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you." Our separation from the world will manifest itself eventually though, because our belief and faith in Jesus Christ is stronger than our job, where we live, our personal experiences, and even our bond with our family. There's going to be plenty of times, after we get to know people, that we'll have the opportunity to tell them about our faith in God. And there will be those who are going to want to hear more, and there will be those who don't want to hear anything else, at all.

But, it's going to start to become more obvious, over time, based on in the decisions we make, the company we keep, the things we talk about, the places we go, and the places we avoid. We're not any better than anyone, although you might get accused of that at some point in your life in Christ, and we're not any worse off than anybody else, either. It's a matter of separating ourselves from the sinful ways of this world, and that's a spiritual matter, and that has nothing to do with our standing in society.

I'm going to ask you to turn with me to John chapter seventeen. I believe most of the words of this net passage are in red; as most of you know, those are the words of Christ. This is Jesus talking to His disciples.

John 17:13-16 *And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.*

So even when it seems like it's OK to get down with the world, and don't get me wrong—there is such a thing as good, clean, wholesome fun, but in this context we're talking about corrupt behavior. Now, I'm just going to share a few things, because, sometimes the world can get a little boring, and there are things that we can do—and I'm not talking about, just to try to spice it up, or to try to, like, again, the goal here is not to get as worldly as possible, but we are in this world. The Bible talks about not abusing the fashion of this present world, for the world passes away (1 Corinthians 7:31). I had an experience just last week: I travel occasionally, for work. I was down in Tupelo, Mississippi, and, for those of you who don't know, that was Elvis Presley's birthplace. Now, I know that he's a little bit before my time, but my mom was a real big fan. She'd seen him, back in the 1970's, and she's got all kinds of albums, and so-on and so-forth. So, I figured, "Well, you know what? I'm going to just take a ride over there. I'm going to look, you know, just see where he lived, see where he grew up." I mean, really, for her sake. I think it was something that, I was really surprised, because it is a very, very small place. Very humble beginnings, and, this is something I kind of looked up a little bit more, the church that he had attended was down the street a little ways. They've brought that up to the property; they've got a museum on that area, now. And, it happened to be a Pentecostal church. And, I know that that was his upbringing. And I'm not here

talking about Elvis as much as I'm talking about the things that we do in life. I had a trip to up-state New York, about four months ago, I had a chance to see Niagara Falls. I mean, just one afternoon, finished the job, took a drive up there, and it is pretty incredible. And these are things, I mean, you're looking at God's creation. I mean, it's not so much that, "Wow, it's just so fascinating," or, how many different ways can you look at water going over a cliff. I mean, it's neat, it's a neat thing to see, and it's a fun thing to do, but I would say that we can't worship the things of the world more than the creator, which is God Almighty. That is a fact. The Bible talks about not worshipping the creature (Romans 1:25), not worshipping the things of the world (1 John 2:15), and, even, like, one thing you mentioned, Parrish, last week, we can't trust in the blessings of God as much as we trust in God, Himself. We have to continue to listen to that voice of God. So, I said all that to say, that Jesus himself made this declaration about coming out from among them, and being separate. He talked about, "I'm in the world, but I'm not of the world." But, again, I want to balance that by sharing, there are things that we're able to do. I was down at a baseball game this past Monday; Jason F. just called me out of the blue. He said, "You want to go to a baseball game?" And I was like, "Okay, sure, what time?" I mean, we coordinated all the logistics. We had a good time, although the Sox lost, for those of you that are—I'm a Boston Red Sox fan, so I kind of was like rooting for them, for his sake, because I could see how bummed out he was getting, but I was like, "Well, you know, get used to it." But, anyway, we had a good time; we went out for some dinner afterwards, and so-on and so-forth. But, we have to come out from the world and be separate, and, again, we are going to be able to do some things. There are such things as good, clean, wholesome fun. There are things that we can do. I mean, we have picnics, and we have different outings, and those things are something that, I think, it keeps us interested, it keeps us going.

2nd Point – Fight the Good Fight of Faith

You know, this might even sound a little strange to say but there's always been war going on, even in peacetime. That's because we're talking about a spiritual warfare, which anybody that's a Christian, and I'm talking to a roomful of Christians, today, we're all too aware of it. The Bible talks about, in Ecclesiastes, there's no discharge in that war (Ecclesiastes 8:8). It talks about, in Ephesians 6:12, "...We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." So, how much more clear can it get? We have to have the perspective that we're drafted in, whether we like it or not, and avoid it, or pretend the war isn't real, or we can use the power that God gives us, every day of our life, to fight the good fight of faith.

I'm going to read First Timothy chapter six, verses six through twelve. It's a little bit lengthy of a passage, but...

1 Timothy 6:6-12 *But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.*

So, fight the good fight of faith. This passage isn't meant to incriminate people with wealth as much as it is to understand that our time here on earth isn't going to last forever. We're not supposed to get too attached to the things of this world. So, I want to share a little personal story. Anyone who knows

me knows, yeah, I like to take pictures; I wouldn't really, what would be considered a fanatic, or certainly not anything close to a professional. Over the course of maybe thirty years, I've accumulated about 13 photo albums, and, I have to say that I think my passion probably came from my dad. He's got pictures that date back all the way to the 1950's. But, one thing I've noticed, that, several times, when I've gone home, over the last seven or eight years—and he's seventy-eight, now, so he's getting older. I mean, we all are, but, he's got a couple of racks, down in the basement, where he's got them all dated. And, 1967, 68, 69, 70, 71, in a chronological order, and it's really something. And, I know that, when I go home, I kind of like to pull out a couple of them randomly, and just kind of look back, and, even when we have friends of the family come over, and they'll just kind of go through them, and, it's something that, it's one of those things that, it's kind of like, is it fun? It kind of is. It's enjoyable, it's kind of reminiscent, it's the kind of thing where we're able to, like, relive some memories, or rekindle some memories. But, what he's said to me, over these last several times, is, "I don't know what's going to happen to those photo albums after I'm gone." And, her just sort of says it in a nonchalant way, like, you know, he's hinting. He really is hinting. And, I sort of remained stoic, like, "Uh, I don't know, dad. Gee, I really don't know." But, I finally relented, in the last, "Okay, I'll take them." And he still asks. That's the thing, even after I've said, "Yes, I'll take those photo albums" he still says it, you know, the next trip out. "Jeez, I don't know what's going to happen to those. So, what does any of that have to do with fighting the good fight of faith?"

I wanted to share that story because it's kind of light-hearted, and I wouldn't really even say that it's a major personal conflict for him, but it has to do more with the fact that we're not going to live forever in this world, and we can't grow so attached to things—and I'm not saying he is. I think he's come to the conclusion, or the understanding that, as much as he'd like to take them with him, anything that we get that attached to, even in this life, we can't take it with us. In the Book of Job, Job talked about, "Naked came I into the world, and naked shall I return thither; blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21)."

But, as far as fighting this good fight of faith, what is it we do when we really face a major problem, or we have a major battle, or it seems we're fighting something that's insurmountable? How is it even possible to be fighting some of the hardest battles that we've ever faced, and yet still have the peace of God? I would say it's blessings from God more than anything. It's those blessings from God that sustain us when everything around us seems to be falling apart. And, I really don't know how else to define it, and I want to say that again: I don't think the blessings from God can always be so easily defined. And that leads us to our next section:

3rd Point – Be Blessed

There was a guy I knew quite a few years ago and he was a friend, although I've since lost touch. I would say he was a little on the religious side, but I would say, at that time in my life, I was really starting to seek for some answers, so I believe he was a good influence. I remember a lot of times when I'd ask him, or I'd overhear somebody else ask him, "Well, how are you doing? How's everything going?" and he would just say, "I'm blessed." In all honesty, personally, I kind of like to mix up my responses a little bit to say, "I'm doing pretty good," "I'm doing well," "I'm doing fine," and I'm not, certainly, criticizing that, because, if that's your personality, if that's your style, I believe that God gives us a lot of freedom in that way that we conduct ourselves, in that way that we interact with people in society, we're not all boxed into one exact caricature, or, we're not supposed to fit one exact personality; I thank God for that. But, having said that, I think we can agree that one of our goals is to be to be blessed of God and to know that it's also important to know that God wants to bless us as well.

I thought quite a bit while preparing this message about what exactly does it mean to be blessed? About explaining it, about defining it, about putting it into a short phrase... What does Wikipedia say about it? What does the concordance say about it? What the blessings are, and what they mean, and so

on and so forth. But, I prayed to God, and as it dawned on me more and more, I realized that, I don't think you can really put it in just a few words, or just a few examples. The death of a saint (despite the sadness and the loss) ranks right up there with the birth of a child in the eyes of the Lord and that's about as far across the spectrum as we can go, Amen?

God's word teaches us in Psalms 23:6, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." So, how's that for a promise from God? That's something that goes from here until eternity. And, I would call that being blessed beyond our greatest imaginations. That's being blessed beyond something that we could ever describe, and say, "Oh, well, it just—I would say it's just like this." Because it isn't. But, it would seem that God would want to bless us no matter what we do. And I suppose that's a belief that's taught in the world, but I would venture to say that there's more to it than that, and the truth is it's just not quite so random.

Isaiah 1:18-20 *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.*

So, I want to actually back up a second and make that statement one more time, just so there's a connection to this next point: It would seem that God would want to bless us, regardless of what we do. And, I suppose that people are teaching that. But, I would venture to say that it's just not that random. So, having just read Isaiah 1:18-20, "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it." We can't live however we want and expect God to bless us, that's just a fact. Blessings from God aren't guaranteed to everyone and are only promised and delivered if we live right. That is an action step we have to take. Everybody wants to be blessed, even people who don't even call it a blessing from God, and in that context I'm referring to people who are just outright unbelievers. Ever get a cut, and it just healed on its own? How is that not a blessing from God? I mean, ever get some kind of ailment, or you wake up, and you have the breath of life? Or, you're driving down the road, and you reach your destination safely. You have a meal on the table. I mean, you could just go on and on and on and on... "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..." and that's before even dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. Because, we haven't crossed that threshold; we haven't pulled back that curtain to look on the other side while God is blessing us, here, in this life.

Our General Pastor, who by the way, will be here along with his wife Debbie in a couple weeks—I know I'm happy; we're all happy to hear that—but he shared many years ago about how we have to put ourselves in a position to receive God's blessing. Again, it's not just random; it's not accidental. It's not something that just happens to anybody. I'm not saying that there aren't times where people, again, who are absolute unbelievers—atheists, agnostics, whatever you want to say, whatever other belief that doesn't esteem Christ as Lord and King—that God's not blessing them, in order to try to get them to come to the knowledge of the Truth. There is a verse where Christ was talking about—I'm going to turn to it. It's in Luke chapter six, verse thirty-five, again, the words of Christ:

Luke 6:35 *But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.*

This is a point that really hit me a few years ago, because it dawned on me, in the sense of, how kind am I to the unthankful and evil? If I'm supposed to be in the image of Christ, if I'm supposed to be Christ-like, I'm more resentful. I'm like, "Forget them. I don't want to deal with them at all." Like you

mentioned, Malcolm, I want to go over there and chop their head off. I'm talking about in the flesh, sometimes, you deal with people who are just as contrary, as combative, as frustrating, as downright maddening, as you could possibly imagine, and, yet, it says our Father is "kind to the unthankful and to the evil." That's what I mean, that's the connection I'm talking about when people don't even want to call it a blessing from God; it's still a blessing from God. It's still a blessing from God, but, how much more is God going to bless us that are on our hands and knees thanking God for the breath of life, thanking God for getting us to this point, thanking God for the promises that He has, even for just the rest of today. And God has something for each individual; that's something else that Parrish mentioned last week. That's a personal thing. That's something where we might have to take it like the person standing next to you that's—their life is in chaos or in turmoil, or an absolute disaster, because they refuse and rebel, and not listening to the word of God. There is a chance; anybody can come back, anybody can come back. That's the reconciliation aspect that we have that, there God has outstretched hands before us.

But, I want to share a quick sidebar in case there's any misunderstanding or uncertainty. The opposite of a blessing—what would people say is the opposite of a blessing? a curse. And we're not talking about sports teams; we're talking about real life. And there is actually a chapter, I would recommend reading it; I know it's a little bit lengthy, but, I wouldn't say that you have read it today, but Deuteronomy chapter 28. Probably one of the most in-depth, and probably one of the best passages that we could find that actually goes into so much detail about if you listen to God, if you keep His commandments, if we do right, you'll be blessed beyond belief, beyond your greatest understanding. But, if you don't, look at this list of curses that are going to come upon you. And, it's a pretty scary thing, but, it's reality, Malcolm, like what you talked about. It's reality; this isn't fun and games.

So, I want to get—before I turn to my last point—what happens if we commit sin? Can we still be blessed of God? The Bible says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). But sinning and falling short, and then repenting, and getting back on track is different than being cursed and that's important to know. Being cursed is an on-going place, the same as being blessed is an on-going place. God wants to bless everyone and doesn't want to curse anyone, but ultimately we decide where we're going to live.

The last point today:

GREAT LAKES 4th Point – Endure To the End

One thing I noticed, as I was putting this together, is that all of these points require effort on our part. Separating ourselves from the world, fighting the good fight of faith, being blessed, and enduring to the end, takes effort. And I wish I could tell you being a Christian is easy, and everything's always going to go exactly as we plan and hope and think, and so-on and so-forth, but it doesn't. It's probably one of the hardest ways of life, but it's the best life, by far, I would say. And everybody has to decide that on their own. That's not something where we can force anybody else to have that perspective. It's something where it's a matter of taking that understanding, taking that belief, planting our flag in the stand, and just saying, "I do believe it is." I haven't seen—I'm talking about the most worldly of worldly of worldly people, and I'm looking at it, and I'm just thinking, "I don't want to live like that." I just don't! And I'm not even feel inferior whatsoever. I don't feel—okay, what is it you're doing that's so great? Tell me! And, again, getting back to the fun part, I've had some things in my life that I consider fun. Just in the last couple of weeks, the last couple of months. I mean, and sometimes I think, "I can't believe this. This is actually okay with God!" And, again, I'm not talking about being imbalanced, or just trying to be, like, go out on the deep end and, "Okay, that's it. I'm just going to blow off church, and blow off Bible study, blow off prayer meetings, and forget everything. I'm just going to have fun because 'I said you could.'" That's not at all what I'm talking about. So, don't misquote me. Most of you know our Founding

Pastor said on a number of occasions, “There are a lot of good ways to live, but there’s only one good way to die.” And, along with those statements I’d like to add that God bestows on us things that we could never have gotten on our own, no matter how hard we tried, who we asked, or how much we paid for it. I’m talking about those things, as far as those blessings where it’s like, you get an understanding, the power He gives us, the transformation God gives us, the renewing, the confidence, the peace, the joy, the understanding, the good memories, the good times, the smoothing things over, forgiving us our sins. And, it one of those things where, sometimes, I think we can all relate to this, it’s almost like you don’t want to say, “God, I’m really enjoying this,” because you think what’s going to happen is, you’re going to end up like Job, where God’s going to say, “What?” God’s not trying to trick us into anything, or trying to, like, have fun at our expense. Sometimes things come along, and, I don’t know what God is saying or talking about if I’m not there; all I know is, sometimes battles come up unexpectedly, and they are far beyond what we could have ever thought, but, again, when God gives us that power to be able to sustain us, to be able to get through, to be able to continue in the faith, to be able to fight the good fight of faith, thank God. Thank God for that.

So why aren’t more people jumping on the Christian band-wagon? I have no idea, so, if you find out, let me know! Because I’m looking at it like, you know what? It’s not a matter of looking at it and thinking, “Okay, I’m satisfied, up to this point.” I want more of the blessings God has to offer for the future. But, I also look at it like what God has done for the life—for the time that I’ve been a Christian, which has been twenty-eight years, which is not a long time to some, but, maybe it’s longer than your whole life to others. But, I also look at it like, I wasn’t raised religiously at all. But I also look at it like, again, when I was searching, when I was looking for answers, and I found this ministry, I thank God for that. I don’t want to forget that. But, you know, as far as why aren’t people wanting to know God as much as we think? They should, or, you’d think there would be people in droves. I mean, you’d think thousands of people would want to get baptized in Jesus’ name. Once the plan of salvation is explained to somebody, especially when we receive it, and we get an understanding, and there’s such a difference in our life, it would seem like, “Well, everybody’s going to understand it,” or, “Everybody’s going to want to do it.” But don’t let that discourage you. Don’t let that make you second-guess your own walk with God. So, there’s probably a lack of effort. That, and I’m sure there’s plenty of other things. But, I want to read our last passage, which is going to be from the Book of John, chapter three, verse sixteen through nineteen, and, by the way, all of us know this first verse, I would say. And, Again, I’ve shared, I know, I wasn’t really religious growing up, so, I didn’t even know what that one was, and, I’ve shared this before: There was a guy back in the seventies and eighties. He used to be a World Series or Superbowls or big events. This white guy with a rainbow-colored afro. And, he had this placard, he’d wave it around, and, like, the backstop, when the camera would pan, and it said, “John 3:16.” And I would look at that, and I said, “Huh. I wonder what that is.” Did anybody else not know what that was? Parrish. So, a few of us. So that’s good; I’m in good company. So, anyway:

John 3:16-19 *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. [And I want to highlight this last verse, and, it’s interesting that it ties in with that first verse, being as famously known, famously well-known as it is, that verse nineteen is overlooked so often] And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*

So, nobody wants to think that deep down within themselves that they’re evil. But who here can exempt themselves from the Word of God? I know I can’t. So how can we escape that judgment?

Well, we escape that judgment by loving light more than darkness and it's possible when we have the Spirit of God leading us. We escape that judgment by focusing on Christ saving our souls and not the condemnation that the world faces. And we escape that judgment by enduring to the end. For, it says in Matthew 24:13, "But he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved."

Thank you for your time, and God bless.

